

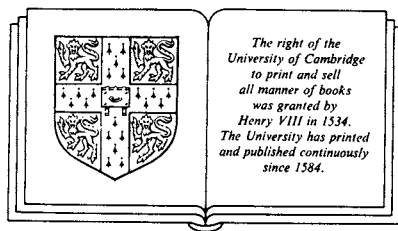
The German experience of professionalization

Modern learned professions and their organizations
from the early nineteenth century to the Hitler era



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Introduction

This work is an analysis of the creation and development of modern learned professions in Germany. It includes most, but not all, occupations requiring some kind of special or higher theoretical training (as opposed to the kind of training needed for manual labor, crafts, and trades). Specifically, such professions include "old" ones as physician, lawyer, and clergyman, as well as "new" ones such as engineer, teacher, and chemist. It seeks not only to show how such training came about, but also how the recipients of that training organized themselves into modern national professional groups to attempt to influence the conditions of professional life. It also seeks to gauge the successes and failures of those attempts.

The chronological boundaries of this work were chosen for two reasons. First, German learned professions were able to take on the contours of modernity only by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Like most other occupations, the traditional professions were not free. The weakening and widespread elimination of guild privileges by the first half of the nineteenth century had their counterpart in the opening of more scope for professional autonomy at the same time, but throughout most of the preceding centuries professions had been regulated from without. The conditions allowing for the creation of specifically *modern* learned professions will be explored in Chapter 2.

Second, the opportunity of professionals themselves to associate, organize, and attempt to shape the conditions of their occupations was severely restricted, if not made impossible, by the conservative German governments prior to the mid-nineteenth century and by the National Socialist regime beginning in 1933. Much as I would have liked to pursue the roots of modern professions backward in time and to write extensively about learned professions in the much-altered conditions since 1945, such an undertaking would have flown in the face of the realities of contemporary scholarly publishing and would require two additional volumes. The inhibition of professional autonomy in both the era of Metternich and that of Hitler also appear to set natural limits of roughly one century to the central experiment of professional development.

This work grows out of some specific interests of the author and is necessarily influenced by certain patterns of my experience and thinking, as well as scholarly debates about the meaning and importance of professions. It can only be fair to the reader to make these open and clear at the outset.

Born in the United States at the beginning of World War II, I grew up in a world dominated by the struggle against Nazi Germany. My interest in Germany was rooted from a very early age in the seeming contradiction between the great cultural achievements of the German *Volk* and the misery, even barbarism of other aspects of its history, usually those involving a misuse of power. Later, as a student of German history, the contradiction between the German "creation" of modern historical scholarship, based on textual authenticity and alleged value-free interpretation, and the wildly varying interpretation of another country's history by scholars increasingly obsessed with the power of the German state, led me to write *The German Historians and England*.

My mentor, Hajo Holborn, who gave so much fine impetus to a skeptical but sympathetic approach to German history in this country, pointed out that the discrepancies in German intellectual history should be sought, *inter alia*, in the structure of the educational system. I examined the contradictions of *Macht* and *Geist* in *State, Society and University in Germany, 1700–1914*. To my surprise, the contradiction was not as strong as has traditionally been supposed in the English-speaking world. Power and intellect sought not to destroy each other, but to reach a symbiosis.

Obviously the tendency for state and university to cooperate more often than they were adversaries did not square with the more romantic notion of universities championing pure spirit against the neanderthalic baseness of rigid bureaucracy, although there were some spectacular examples of the latter in the nineteenth century. Despite all the idealistic rhetoric (fostered, self-interestedly, by universities themselves) about the noble and selfless dedication to the unfettered life of the mind, universities continued to have, in an increasingly central way, the role of training Germany's civil and ecclesiastical servants, as had been the case at least since the Reformation. Particularly as the civil service came to be more and more professionalized, the links between university and state were, in the sense of personnel, an interactive continuum rather than a mere bond of hatred or suspicion.

The implication for this author, after studying the German higher educational system in its broader relationship with society and state, was to examine the products of that system, its "graduates." One of the many German myths about *alte Burschenherrlichkeit* (golden college days) reproduced endlessly in memoirs and even scholarly histories of universities was that students were at university for the spiritual experience, not for the grinding training that would make them into competent professionals. The ideal of Wilhelm von Humboldt in creating the "new model" University of Berlin as a place for quiet reflection,

an institutional setting for a pristine "solitude and freedom," was little more than an aristocratic dream quickly dispelled by the cold day of reality. Berlin and all the other universities became not so much hotbeds of intellectual freedom, but seedbeds of disciplined professional behavior.

How could they not have? The state ran and funded the educational system, and it wanted competent, well-trained clergymen, teachers, physicians, and lawyers. The more successful German states learned from their western neighbor, France, and to a much smaller degree from England, that melding the energies and desires of the best of the *moyenne classe* and the service aristocracy with the welfare of the state produced good results – "the public welfare" – as well as higher tax revenues, greater prosperity, and public trust. The lesson learned by the German reformers of the Napoleonic era was that for subjects to become involved citizens, they needed autonomy in addition to discipline, self-actuating knowledge rather than rote learning, and rights as well as duties. A better-educated and more flexible, initiative-taking bureaucracy with admission and rewards based more on competence than birth had to initiate this revolution.

Authority based on intellectual achievement and individual responsibility – incidentally two attributes of modern professions – amounted to a dangerous proposition, as both Napoleon and his conqueror, Wellington, saw clearly by 1815. As will be clear in Chapter 3, Count Metternich agreed with them. "Ideologues," intellectuals, or the educated classes of society may have been perceived as a threat to the power classes, but they were also indispensable. The survival of the modern bureaucratic state depended on the mediation of its servants, bureaucratic, educational, military (and even medical, after the passage of some decades). And just as unfree agricultural labor and guild restrictions were increasingly abolished as a brake to the growth and prosperity of the economy, so strict bureaucratic regulation of many professions yielded to greater self-government.

The relative neglect of these "graduates" by critical historians until fairly recently has begun to yield to a variety of approaches to this special and important layer of German society. Excellent studies have appeared or will shortly appear about educated elites, as a part of "middle class" research. Others have examined individual professions at different times. "Mentality" studies, inspired by Paris, are also increasingly available. Social mobility studies exist at least for Germany. All this excellent research puts in question not only naive notions of what "graduates" did and were, but most received scholarly opinion.

What has not been much done is a critical examination of the "graduates" in terms of their later work-lives and their adherence to disciplinary communities that also took on the organizational forms of modern professional groups, eventually attempting to articulate the standards of the various "learned" professions and to advance their own interests. Histories of various professions

emanating from within their own ranks exist in some profusion, but they are rarely critical. Furthermore, they are not systemic in approach and do not examine the whole range of professions in given epochs.

What I believe is needed, and what this work attempts to provide, is a system-wide analysis of the modern professionalization process itself, addressing the advance of standards deemed desirable by organizations of practicing professionals themselves, but incorporating the widest practical array of such organizations in order to seek common patterns of behavior. This novel approach not only facilitates a comparative analysis of the various professional disciplines in Germany but international comparisons as well. The focus here is not on medicine or engineering as such – for disciplinary history is only partly professionalization history – but on medicine and engineering insofar as they organized practitioners and tried to shape the parameters of professional life.

But why study professions at all? As Chapter 2 of this work will address in more detail, many twentieth-century students of modern societies have identified professions as a key concept in unlocking the structure and functioning of those societies. Other social theorists have all but ignored them or subsumed them under broader categories (e.g. “class” with Marx, *Herrschaft* with Weber). Even social theorists who have not bothered much with professions per se have perceived revolutionary implications in the “managerial” or “expert-dominated” essence of decision-making in contemporary societies. How are these experts chosen and trained? How, in social systems as diverse as the United States and the Soviet Union, can one plausibly argue that “convergence” depends on the rule of experts or “professionals”? Both the right-wing market philosophy of Milton Friedman and the “vanguard-of-the-working-class” justification of Communist Party rule deny the higher authority of professionals, but they seem to influence the parameters of decisions, whether by market or party, nevertheless.

All of this argument presupposes, of course, that there is some reality behind the concept of professions, and that it is not an “urban myth” or a complete fabrication of the information/entertainment industry of the late twentieth century. As we shall see in the next chapter, however, even those historians and social scientists who tend to deny the central importance of professionalism, let alone professional claims to monopoly, authority, special status, or social utility, do not deny the reality of professions, at least not in the English-speaking world. Assuming that reality, one further purpose of this work is to clarify the extremely vague connotations current in the English language about “profession,” “professional,” and “professionalization.” Comparison is still one of the best ways to clarify concepts; in the case of this work, comparison between English usage and the empirical reality of another culture.

Traditional nineteenth-century liberal beliefs in Anglo-American political culture, still current under different political labels today, hold that the private sphere of life should be left unmolested by the state as much as possible. Liberals on the continent of Europe often had a more accepting view of state inter-

vention as such, seeking rather to shape and control that intervention by a process of advice and consent of those involved. This belief may indeed be only that, flying in the face of evidence to the contrary, as Magali Sarfatti Larson argued in her brilliant and controversial work, *The Rise of Professionalism*. If professional organizations in the English-speaking world actually used the power of the state to reinforce their monopoly of services and control their market, older assumptions about the "freedom" of the liberal professions from government "intervention" in the English-speaking world must be rethought.

And in that case, too, so must the history of professions on the European mainland. They may instead be viewed as just as interactive with state power as their sister professions in England and America. Such a view calls into question the widespread (if rarely examined) assumption of Anglo-American social theory that professions were fundamentally different on the European continent.

The study of German professions is important for other reasons as well. Other historians in the English-speaking world, notably in England, have since underlined the notion that there was no German "special path," or *Sonderweg*. Power and cultural elites cohabited quite well in England, and as some American social scientists and historians have also been arguing, in that country as well.

One disturbing implication of such arguments is that Hitler is a perfectly understandable link in the continuity of German history. The state and the educated elite, also the middle class, always seek and usually find accommodation, even if it is in distortions of the "historical processes" described by Hegel and Marx. As the reader will find, I am skeptical of this "continuity" argument as it applies to the National Socialist regime. Otherwise, I see a great deal of continuity between educated elites and government. International debate about a "special path" stands and falls on the place of the Nazi regime and its crimes, including those carried out by "professionals."

Many excellent works on the crimes of professionals under National Socialism have appeared since World War II. To mention only two widely read studies in the field of medicine, those of Alexander Mitscherlich and Robert Jay Lifton, appearing, respectively, shortly after the end of World War II and nearly forty years later. Both authors are scrupulous in documenting the decay of professional ethics under Nazi rule.¹

But can such evidence of decay be transposed to all members of the profession, and not just the small number who participated in inhumane experiments? Many scholars have gone so far as to identify the "failure" of German professionals to "stop" Hitler, if not a professional culture saturated with National Socialist ideology, as contributing elements to the nightmare of 1933–45. The assumption is often *pars pro toto*. A great deal more empirical research

1 Alexander Mitscherlich, *Doctors of Infamy: The Story of the Nazi Medical Crimes* (New York, 1949) and Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York, 1986).

will be needed to back up such assumptions, for thus far (and this work will argue mostly in this direction) what is known appears ambiguous.

Although I hope the meaning of such terms as "profession" will gain in contour through this work, the reader should be assured that this work does not proceed along semantic lines or employ the techniques of "deconstructionism." The techniques of Gadamer, Derrida, their predecessors, and their followers undoubtedly have their place in expanding the interpretation of "texts." But my purpose is to synthesize an interpretation of the rise of modern professions in Germany, not to call into question their meaning. I have usually assumed actors meant and understood what they wrote, said, read, and heard. This does not mean accepting the objective veracity of all such statements or discounting self-interest behind them. But in a work of reconstruction, one must begin with the assumption that such statements have clear meaning.

I hope it is also evident from the body of the work that I am not a follower of either classic functionalists or critical interpreters of professions in general (more will be said about those antipodes in Chapter 2). Historians need neither glorify nor belittle professions, or rather their driving collective motivations, to analyze and understand them. I have drawn on arguments used by both sides in the debates about professionalization over the last few decades.

This consultation of primarily Anglo-American theoretical work on professionalization was all the more necessary because there is no extensive corpus of theoretical literature on professions by German scholars. As Chapter 2 suggests, this corpus reveals sharp disagreements about the nature of professions even in England and America, let alone continental Europe. Nevertheless, this corpus of scholarly literature must necessarily remain a point of reference in examining continental professionalization. Even if there were a unified Procrustean bed of the sociology of professions, it would be methodologically misguided to try to force continental experience into it. The important differences of the continental experience, can, however, be illuminated better by keeping the parameters of Anglo-American theory in mind.

Aside from their importance as a subform of the organization of labor or, in the German case, of that influential stratum of the middle class that derived its legitimacy largely from education – the *Bildungsbürgertum*, why should professions interest historians at all? By its barest definition, a profession is just another occupation, and it often becomes confused with others, as in "professional hairdresser." But if the term is to have any clear meaning, it must apply to those occupations that require a high degree of usually theoretical training as a precondition and a high degree of responsibility as a practitioner. Guilds, before their decline in the eighteenth century, may have served this purpose often, but their eclipse before the free labor market in the nineteenth century served to accentuate the differences between skilled laborers and professional men.

A "profession" is more than a special kind of occupation, however: the term also applies to the entirety of a discipline (e.g. medicine) or more narrowly to

the organizations that represent significant portions of its practitioners (e.g. a medical association). Thus, studying professions, singly or collectively, can shed much light on the development of disciplines in practice (as opposed to the theoretical side evident in research and teaching within the discipline). Professional organizations also serve the useful function of articulating the self-image and wishes of the members of the profession and thereby of the primarily middle-class aspirations of its members.

How learned occupations became professions, one of the main themes of this work, might be broadly termed "professionalization." It was not always a "project" carried out by the "external" dictates of disciplinary necessity (e.g. advances in medical knowledge) or at the behest of government bureaucracies (as the tenor of current German professionalization theory holds), nor always a Whig-history tale of triumph by disinterested, well-organized professional groups against ignorance and superstition (as the tenor of much older Anglo-American literature, especially that of the professions themselves, has held). There seems nothing inevitable about professionalization, about this process of discipline communities becoming better organized, more self-regulating, more exclusive or difficult of entry. The German case helps us see how dialectical the process was, with decades of "progress" being washed out in a few short years. But the very process itself, seen from the angle of professional people and the organizations they helped build (or in some cases opposed), can shed new light on German domestic history as well.

The chief foci of this work are the great national professional organizations that began to form in the 1840s and were mostly expunged or co-opted by the Nazis during the 1930s. Their interactions with public bodies (governments, bureaucracies, universities) and even private groups (e.g. industry) formed the core of research. The focus on national organizations was dictated in part by logic, since their views and officers tended to be more representative of the professions as a whole than regional or local associations (a few of which were even older than national bodies). But the records of regional and local bodies proved in almost all cases to be ill-preserved or not very helpful in shedding light on major issues of professionalization in the time period under consideration here. Not that the records of the national organizations were always complete or helpful, quite the contrary. But national professional journals and publications managed to preserve much important information that was destroyed in its archival form.

Within the major learned professions, some seemed more appropriate for inclusion in this study than others. The choice was often made by the professions themselves: some, such as the clergy and military officers, created national professional organizations very late, or these were rather quiescent, or both. Some, like journalists, were never really able to agree on what criteria defined their occupation or that higher theoretical training was necessary to it. Much the same could be said of many very skilled occupations, such as the arts or

publishing, in which often unstandardizable attributes such as talent or imagination complicated the search for professional identity and homogeneity, in which external certification had given way to market forces for validation of success, and where the self-taught often proved to be the great innovators.

It is precisely in such areas that the application of categories such as profession and professionalization can be helpful and shed new light on German social history. Artists, journalists, and officers all belonged, in German parlance, to a *Stand* (estate), as did doctors and lawyers; but they did not all belong to learned professions in the way doctors and lawyers did. Insofar as they found it difficult or impossible to organize their *Stand* to press for more uniform standards of admission (usually through higher educational qualifications and certification procedures), they might be said to have been "nonprofessionalizing" or "late professionalizing" occupations. Some were unquestionably already professions (e.g. the clergy) or part of a profession (e.g. the upper civil service as a part of the legal profession), but since they organized late or feebly, they might be called even "late professionalizing (old) professions." The process of organizing, agitating, demanding altered access to the occupation, higher economic rewards and security, and other "lobbying" features are precisely the hallmarks of the professionalization process in the modern world; but not all professions or would-be professions made use of these features in equal measure. This work concentrates especially on those that did.

If it is fair to say that the difference between Germany today and the same territory two centuries ago is that a *Leistungsgesellschaft* (achieving society) has replaced a *Ständegesellschaft* (society of estates), then the principles espoused by modern German professions must reflect more than those of other groups in this transition. Yet German academic professions and their organizations have never been seriously studied as a group. The "graduates" of the German higher educational system confronted the adult world at least as much *qua* graduates of law, philosophy, medicine, theology, and later other technical faculties as *qua* *Bildungsbürger*, and thus their behavior in discipline-oriented, modern professional organizations must be of interest to historians.

More universal reasons for studying professions, including the increasing centrality of expertise in the management of the modern world (or put negatively, the "tyranny of experts"), will be discussed in the following chapter. Yet the German experience of professionalization, with its complicated tangle of private sphere and bureaucratically controlled dimensions, may prove more typical of professionalization throughout the twentieth-century world than the Anglo-American "model" from which much of the social-science theory of professions has been derived. Let us now turn to that body of theory.